

Nostradamus

A Healer of Souls in the Renaissance

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THE PLACE BEYOND WORDS

Just when I was beginning to think that I should abandon this topic, a major piece of evidence caught my attention. Nostradamus, the writer of enigmas that he called ‘prophecies’ and ‘presages’, chose to call himself an ‘astrophile’. Yet if he tried to find an enduring science in the stars above, in the ‘movement of the celestial sphere’, ‘a Deo a natura’ (from God and from Nature), it was not without deeper reasons than those which determined his vocation as an astrologer. Like François Rabelais, his contemporary, he was first and foremost a ‘physician’ who, following his studies at the ‘perfect Faculty of Medicine’ in Montpellier, had practised medicine, probably from the end of the 1520s or the beginning of the 1530s. He looked after his patients at particularly critical junctures such as virulent epidemics. According to his son César, writing later in his *History of Provence*, the city of Aix-en-Provence hired Nostradamus on 30 May 1546 to help with the ‘preservation of the city’ during a ‘terrible’ plague that lasted nine months. Cemeteries were so full of bodies that the city ran out of consecrated ground in which to bury its victims. In the second day of the outbreak, those afflicted fell into a ‘frenzy’, albeit without any sign of marks (buboes being the characteristic swellings of bubonic plague) on their body: ‘And those who were visited with such marks, they died suddenly while talking, without any change to their mouth, but after their death, their whole body was covered with black buboes; and those who died in frenzy, their urine was the consistency of white wine, and after their death, half of the whole body was the colour of the sky, tinged with violet blood’. The account continues: ‘The epidemic was so malignant and violent that one only needed to come within five paces of a victim to be contaminated. Many people had malignant pustules on their fronts and backs, and even down their legs. Those who had them on the back could be lanced, and most of them

escaped death. But not one of those who had them on the front escaped'. The victims lasted no more than six days. Bloodletting and medicines had no effect whatsoever. And, 'after a house-to-house search of the city had been conducted, and all those found to be suffering from the plague ejected, there were more victims than ever the following day'. This was an atrocious world, in which fathers abandoned their children if they showed signs of being infected, 'some people' interpreting this as divine punishment, 'for one league all around, good health prevailed, and the whole town was so infected that the glance alone of someone contaminated immediately infected another'. Some victims chose to throw themselves into a well, or jump out of a window. Nostradamus saw a woman herself sewing a shroud into which she slid to await death. Pregnant women had spontaneously aborted and died within four days, the new born dying suddenly, their body a vivid purple 'as though blood had spread through the whole body'. Nostradamus prepared a powder from Provençal iris-lillies and cloves. A year later, it was in Lyon that he practised his craft in another plague, or more probably an outbreak of whooping cough.¹

Rabelais also, as Michael Screech has pointed out, 'handed out cures and palliative medicines for the ills of the body, mind and spirit'. His writing echoes medical practice because the same objectives inspire them both. 'Master Alcofrybas Nasier' (the anagram Rabelais uses for himself in his writings) – better known as the creator of the fictional characters in Gargantua and Pantagruel like Panurge or Friar John – used humour both to make people laugh, and to laugh at themselves. He used it too to make fun of all those Christians whom he regarded as lost in error, those suffering, as it were, from an illness which made them want to put to death or exterminate their fellow human beings because they did not share their own opinions. He regarded Christians as suffering from an all-consuming affliction, rendering them incapable of being the creatures they were, made by God in His own image, to give Him glory and honour in faith and charity. That surely meant that they were 'worth more than a funeral pyre'.² Rabelais' humour, derived no doubt from the rituals of Carnival-tide, was above all a medicine to purge human beings of their passions, and take away the resulting worse excesses. Violence was not out of the question, though, and, as Gérard Defaux has emphasized, Friar John's extraordinary aggression shows how much Rabelais' writing is to be understood as:³

what, for the Old Testament prophet, was a weapon of pure violence, sword, scourge and stick rolled into one, an instrument with which to curse and to fulminate, to punish and to exact revenge; but equally an instrument of ... jubilation, of liberation ...

Nostradamus, albeit via a different approach, also cared for souls. He wanted to put some distance between them and the dangerous world around them, with its mounting delusions and perils, which risked reinforcing the temptations of evil that worked away at them. I propose to consider the complex oeuvre of Nostradamus as a therapy for the soul, in which enigma was the operating mechanism, just as laughter was for Rabelais. Enigmas, for Nostradamus, draw Christians to the Logos. They are an instrument that harbours, in its inwardness and secrecy, the potential to unlock a true comprehension of the Scriptures.

In the sixteenth century, which witnessed massive conflict, there were two possible ways of inuring the soul to ‘philautocry’, that ‘love of self’ which was at the root, as moralists saw it, of all the world’s horrors and atrocities. Rabelais chose the raucous way of laughing people out of themselves in the recounting of his gargantuan adventures. Nostradamus chose the more muted route, wanting to frighten people out of themselves with his enigmas and their hints at terrible things to come. On the one hand, Erasmus discovered in Psalm 2 the prophetic prefiguring of Christ’s satiric laughter in the face of wicked men.⁴ The God who scorns his people in the Old Testament remains in the New Testament in the irony of Christ’s laugh. Imitating Christ, we are invited to laugh at folly and fools too. On the opposite side, however, stands the upright and harsh figure of God, the avenger of human folly and offences, the God who chastises Israel’s infidelity by war, plague and famine. Nostradamus accords that pathetic and tragic Deity a voice in his prophetic utterances when he amasses visions of atrocities and horrors. Fear stirs human beings from their lethargy and alerts them to their forgetfulness of God’s commands, which is what Nostradamus says in a quatrain whose prediction is that when Taurus is in its twentieth degree there will be an earthquake so strong that the whole *theatrum mundi*, the theatre of the world, with us, its spectators, will collapse. Air, earth and sky will be covered in darkness and shaken such that the ‘faithless’ will be moved by fear to beg God and his saints for forgiveness.⁵ Faith and fear are conjoined in a *theatrum mundi* before the gaze of a jealous God.

The objective remains the same, whether God’s temperament is that of angry invective or satiric derision, wrath or risibility: to quicken souls to be alert to God’s will, to sensitize them to human insanity, avarice, luxury, crime and ambition, and guide them to God’s Word. Nostradamus sees his initial vision of an era of peace between Christians, ‘in the accomplishment of God’s word’ as occurring when Habsburg Spain is reconciled with France, but it is followed immediately afterwards by the prediction of a coming great catastrophe, accompanied by an extremely cruel combat. Brave hearts all will then feel the earth tremble beneath their feet.⁶ Is not this how Nostradamus wants to make his reader afraid

by conveying to him the measure of this earth-shaking event so that he will have no part in the worldly failings that will lead to such a chastisement of humanity? Is not this how Nostradamus hopes to heal his reader of the affliction that makes him ignore the fact that everything is transient on this mortal earth, and that violence and misery inevitably follow happiness? Was this not to cure him, too, of the ailment that attaches him to the wealth and hopes here below, which then incite him to attack, kill, massacre and tyrannize his fellow creatures? Is this not Nostradamus' way of indicating that we, the reader, can only expect tribulations on this mortal earth and that it is only by fixing all our hopes on God alone that we can find that quietude of spirit which will allow ourselves to prepare our soul for the Hereafter? Nostradamus explores the human soul, its entire evil proclivity in the great theatre of the world, to turn it around upon itself (to 'convertere', 'convert'). It is not simply that we (as Montaigne put it in his *Essays*): 'recognize in the shadow and in theatrical performances the display of the magical tricks of human fortune'.⁷ It is above all because, piling up misfortune upon misfortune leads, in the Bible, to a moment of awakening. That awakening is to the glory of the One whom humankind, in its violence and cruelty, has banished from its world, the Christ who is sacrificed for the propitiation of its sins. That awakening (or rather re-awakening) is emphatically present in Jacques Grévin's *Brief Discourse for the Comprehension of Theatre* (*Brief discours pour l'intelligence du theatre*), published in 1561. Jean de la Taille reiterated it in his *Art of Tragedy* (*Art de la tragédie*) because it is tragedy's objective to disturb us.⁸ Nostradamus is a prophet of what is tragic in the human condition. So too is his contemporary, Jules César Scaliger (d.1558), expressing it in Aristotelian terms in his *Eight Books on Poetics* (*Poetices libri VIII*), published after his death in 1561. When he depicts a horror-struck humanity, Nostradamus comes close to that sense of the impact of that horror on his readers when he evokes King Saul's tragic vision, terrified as he comes to realize the power of divine wrath:⁹

To be thus human, His anger will I suffer
And to be cruel, will he be kind to me.

To understand this further, we have to explore the concept of the word 'prognostic' in the context of hippocratic medicine. Nostradamus had learnt to be a 'physician' at the University of Montpellier. He treated patients at the same time as he developed his personal prophetic revelation. Ailments and illnesses afflicted the human frame, from the cradle to the grave. Natural or supernatural forces, harmful to varying degrees, dictated those sufferings. That perspective directed his search for what

might be therapeutic. This crucial element in Nostradamus' prophetic vision is situated in a period when 'the new style of hippocratic thought' was in vogue. Hippocrates was set up as a 'model for applied medicine' whilst the 'conciseness of his aphorisms' was applauded, as was 'his way of presenting medical case-studies in his *Epidemics*, and the clarity and brevity of his precepts on the role of the physician and on prognosis'.¹⁰ Through the close observation of the human body and its ailments, hippocratic medicine sought to anticipate what was likely to happen. All the signs are that Nostradamus was an adept of hippocratic, or pseudo-hippocratic preventative medicine. He was doubtless familiar with the works of the 'wise and learned' Jules César Scaliger, 'a second Marsilio Ficino in Platonic philosophy', whose translation and commentary on Hippocrates' *Insomniæ* (*Hippocratis liber de somniis*) saw the light of day in 1538–9 from the Lyon publishing house of Sébastien Gryphe.¹¹ Nostradamus also had close contact with the physician Louis Serres, known as a 'new Hippocrates'. Should we not regard his *Prophecies* as offering a system of beliefs – an episteme, located somewhere beyond the words themselves? That, at least, is what I shall attempt to demonstrate in the remainder of this book, by developing the notion of a dynamic system of symbolic transfer at the heart of his writings, with God at its core: *Soli Deo*, God alone.

It is no coincidence that Nostradamus' prophetic utterances often presage things to come. In his *Præsagia* (*Coaca præsagia* or *Coan Prenotions*), a collection of sayings, as also in his *Prognostics and Prorrhetics*, Hippocrates is the theoretician of a corporal semiotics synonymous with 'prognostics'. By retracing the medical history of a human being he thought one could analyse the symptoms or immediate signs of illness in order to chart its future course, treating with confidence what was amiss or, at the very least, predicting its progression or remission. 'Feeling cold, with tremors and rolling of the eyes, fever and great anxiety is mortal; drowsiness in patients is a bad sign ...' – hippocratic medicine was based around case-histories ('anameses') and an analysis of the symptoms ('signs'). It progressed through diagnosis to prognosis, the latter being the final stage involving predicting what would happen to the patient. This latter was devoted towards preventing what was predicted from actually taking place. For the future state of the human being in question was not the physician's first preoccupation. What was essential was to treat the patient here and now.¹²

'Particularize' was the term Nostradamus used to describe the application of the methodology of the Kos medical school (that of Hippocrates) to human nature. Starting from a point in human time, it involved reconstituting the past to determine the factual consequences for the immediate present, leaving the reader to comprehend and interpret the

'prognostics' or, more explicitly, the 'omens' for the future. Just as it was possible, as François Valleriola proposed, to establish *Medical Commonplaces* (*Loci medicinæ communes*, Lyon, 1562) with which to interrogate the human body, just so there were 'commonplaces' to human temporality, from which the *Centuries* of Nostradamus were derived and which were to be found in contemporary almanacs and books of prognostications. Nostradamus the astrophile and prophet was also Nostradamus the physician, who transferred and applied his medical epistemology to the understanding of human time in an attempt to offer a therapy to contemporaries in the grip of anxiety about what was going to happen to them. His method involved oscillating between aphorisms, maxims, proverbial expressions and enigmatic oracle-like remarks.¹³ Alongside a Biblical mode of discourse, Nostradamus would deploy these particular forms of expression that his medical training and practice had taught him and which together account for the peculiar stylistic form of his own discourse.

The first edition of the *Centuries* was published at the press of Macé Bonhomme in Lyon on 4 May 1555, probably alongside an Avignon edition from that of Pierre Roux. It was entitled *The Prophecies of M. Michel Nostradamus* (*Les Prophéties de M. Michel Nostradamus*) and it is quite possible that this was a reference to the hippocratic *Præsgia*. The hippocratic methods offered a way of communicating meaning, a semiology, linking indissolubly the past, present and the future, to establish conjectures and to proceed towards the discovery (*ordo inventionis*) of truth. Nostradamus applied it to human kind in general, conceived of and treated metaphorically as a patient, its pulse (as it were) monitored after the fashion of *loci communes* through the quatrains. Thus, the patient, although foolishly ignorant of his own medical condition, will be cured of his ailment. There is a logic at work here since the physician (*medicus*) is also a minister of nature (*minister naturæ*)¹⁴ and, as François Valleriola reminds his readers, nature 'is the creator of everything, and the physician is its minister'.

Nostradamus the astrophile wanted to see himself as God's coadjutor in the battle against evil and the physick of souls. Nostradamus' ethos was to be found precisely there, located in the 'the representation of the speaking self, operating through discourse'. That was precisely the sense in which contemporary epistolary manuals referred to the ethics of letter-writing.¹⁵ Nostradamus is part of a long Christian tradition in which it was perfectly legitimate to practise a medicine of the soul as well as one of the body. In the medieval Dionysian tradition (that of Pseudo-Denis the Aeropagite), brought up to date by Nicolas of Cusa and Marsilio Ficino, a deliberate superabundance of images was evoked to the senses 'by virtue of the omniscience of God'. In the mind of the believer, this

heightened their awareness of their own bestiality, and opened them to 'the conscience of the ineffable'.¹⁶ If Nostradamus' physick for the soul includes an element of awakening fear in us, it is because his epistemology 'works through stark transgressions' and through an assemblage of images 'which are merely imperfect conjectures, truth obscured in enigmas'.¹⁷ Nostradamus' writing is one long allegory, encased in multiple sequences of allegorization. It is an allegory because it conceals a truth, manifested with the aid of words that present enigmas precisely because it is a truth that can only be revealed by being hidden. Faith alone will bring one to that Truth, and do so through the workings of a human conversion. Nostradamus' writing is thus, in the excellent phrase of Jan Miernowski, a 'medium of Transcendence'. To understand that Truth is to understand that one cannot understand it. To bring healing to the soul is to lead it to the consciousness of its own absolute finiteness, set against the backdrop of all the world's horrors.

We shall demonstrate that Nostradamus wrote enigmas that were not intended to be unravelled. They were puzzles that were not meant to be solved. That is why they remain a mystery. There is no ontological cogito by which to do so. It is a similar problem to that encountered in Marguerite of Navarre's *Mirror of the Sinful Soul* or her *Heptaméron*. Jan Miernowski comments on her 'negative metaphysic' as follows: 'In the light of [it], the contradictions in literary discourse can only multiply since they inhabit the sphere of human reason, but they become resolved at an ontologically higher level. There, literary discourse decomposes, since that is the sign of the annihilation of the individual, the better to simulate Christ's sacrifice, who becomes Nothing for the love of mankind'.¹⁸ If Nostradamus writes 'under a thick cloud' it is in order that this cloud of unknowing should encompass the reader. At that moment, he will come to know what lies occluded within himself, and go forth towards the mystery of God.

A SELF-CONTRADICTIONARY UTTERANCE

It is difficult to start from any other point except that of a voice emanating from nothing, a shadow of itself, unstructured even, because it seems to reject every classification and invalidate every norm or rule. It is not only the syntactical order of the *Prophecies* of Nostradamus that is disjointed by the almost complete absence of pronouns and conjunctions, or sometimes of verbs. It is also that the words do not carry a rational meaning. His prophetic quatrains play metaphorically with knowledge as though reflecting a cognitive illusion the better to question it:¹

The bright star seven days shall burn
 Cloud shall cause two suns to appear:
 All night long the great mastiff shall howl,
 When great pontiff changes his abode.

Nostradamus uses here a well-attested source, taking inspiration from it whilst at the same time paraphrasing and modifying it. Nothing, however, explains why he makes the changes that he does. The source is the fourth-century BCE Roman writer, Julius Obsequens' *Book of Prodigies* (*Liber de prodigiis*), in which he describes a star of extraordinary brightness which shone for a whole week long at the time of the Roman consuls Marc Antony and Publius Cornelius Dolabella.² Referring to this new star, Nostradamus makes a surprising correction to the text. The Roman historian referred to three suns, shining brightly whilst dogs bayed all night long in front of the house of the triumvir (or 'great pontiff') Marcus Aemilius Lepidus, the largest of them having been torn to pieces by the other. The dog becomes a single ferocious hound in Nostradamus. These were, as Pierre Brind'Amour has shown, the portents of the civil war between Caesar and Marc Antony. But it is difficult to know what

Nostradamus intended by this prophetic *exemplum*. Was it simply intended to reiterate, in a slightly modified form and perhaps adapted to the poetic medium, prodigies from the time of the end of the Roman republic, hence to establish a paradigm for the chaos of civil war? Or was it intended to evoke a parallel historic epoch, because the ‘great mastiff’ makes another appearance in the fifth century:³

The great mastiff from the city chased
Will snarl at the foreign alliance:
After having chased the stag across the fields
The Wolf and the Bear will defy each other.

This time it is no longer a dog barking at night, driven by a predatory instinct, but someone vexed by a ‘foreign’ alliance such that those who have chased the stag, in this case the wolf and bear, will end up at each other’s throats.

The impression is that Nostradamus is playing with epochal time, and that the quatrain, rather than being a presage of the dark future in store for Lepidus, could as well apply to the time of the Great Schism (the antipope John XXIII being known as the ‘stag of Naples’). Equally, it might refer to some other unidentified historical time (the pontiff being known as the ‘servant’ [‘servus’, but also ‘cervus’, viz ‘stag’] of the servants of Christ), or even eschatological time, since the stag could be a reference to Christ. What, at first sight, might seem to be an authentic historical point in time becomes, therefore, by the creative processes of imaginative writing, falsified or undermined. It is a sure sign that one must not be sidetracked into the trap of trying to make such identifications. We should rather imagine it as a kind of poetic composition, piecing together different elements of narrative whilst at the same time deforming them. The result of such metamorphoses is to put into perspective any attempt to link them to any particular event in the past, since it could also apply to another one subsequently.⁴ Nostradamus was not the historian that some have claimed him to be. He wrote his predictions deliberately around the principle of destabilizing the past as well as the future, and the passing moments in time that characterize one epoch from another. He does so precisely in order to indicate the irreparable frailty of our human understanding, which is part of our ontology as human beings. Nostradamus’ fundamental approach to writing is to undermine what would make sense to us, and to erode its potentiality from within. In this scheme of things:⁵

The world’s final age close by,
Slow still Saturn will return:

Empire transferred toward the nation of Brodde,
The eye plucked out at Narbonne by the Vulture.

In a cycle of 354 years and 4 months – corresponding to that of the reign of the planets – the Empire will be handed over to the ‘Brodde nation’ (perhaps the Savoyards) and the eye plucked out by a vulture at Narbonne.⁶ The incident of the vulture is certainly to be found in the predictions of Julius Obsequens but it does not take place in Narbonne. Is the eye in question a person, a prince, or a divinity? Nostradamus locates nothing – time, space, people or their attributes – in any fixed way. He refashions them logically but also arbitrarily in a way dictated to him by his style of oracular utterance.

What undoubtedly makes the quatrains particularly disconcerting and hard to apprehend is their apparent lack of order (*ordo neglectus*). Unstructured digressions, unsequentialities, discrepancies, or apparent semiological similarities create a sense of overall multiplicity. Here is an initial example:⁷

Born deformed, in horror suffocated,
Inhabiting the city of the great King:
Severe edict captives revoked
Hail and thunder, priceless Condom.

It is difficult to discern even the smallest degree of logic in this quatrain – unless, that is, one starts from the premise of a conjuncture of the monstrous birth or death of a child with that of the revocation of an edict as the preliminary sign of an extraordinary storm to hit the town of Condom! Here is a further example:⁸

The wretch overcome will die of grief,
His female vanquisher will celebrate his fall:
Fresh set of laws clear edict decreed,
The wall and Prince on the seventh day will fall.

Once again, the association of two completely divergent statements – the death of a broken man, overcome by melancholy at his own ill-fortune, and the decreeing of a fresh law – provide the preconditions for a prophetic outcome that will occur on the seventh day, the day of Saturn. The identified outcome depends on the apprehension of a convergence of random facts that appear to have no causal relationship to each other. In the two instances cited, similar causes (the death of a monster, and that of a wretched individual) do not produce similar effects for, in the first, a law is repealed, and in the second it is decreed.

What Nostradamus seeks to provide, then, is a key to a language of outcomes that relies on unsequentiality, on a deconstruction of the inductive and deductive rationality of knowledge that seems, nevertheless, to function on the basis of an interchangeable register of factual postulates. Here is a third example:⁹

Sanctity, too faint and seductive,
Accompanied by a fluent tongue:
The old city and Parma too hasty
Florence and Siena shall turn more desert-like.

Everything here seems to revolve around the power of words, whose very abundance is (in a system of inverted relationships) a premonition of the solitude or silence awaiting the two cities of Tuscany. In Nostradamus' scheme of antimonies, more of the one (words) means less of the other (sound). It is as if Nostradamus has determined that one of the rules of grammar for reading the outcomes of prophetic utterances is that of contradiction – the contradiction between abundance and scarcity, between word and silence. A further example demonstrates the point:¹⁰

Born under the shadows and nocturnal day
In sovereign benevolence shall reign:
Will renew his blood from the ancient urn,
Making new the age of bronze into that of gold.

The person who, by his birth, is the incarnation of obscurity and ill-fortune will turn out, on the contrary, to be the one who restores light and happiness.

The rule of meaningful antimonies, however, does not apply universally. There are cases where it does not work, and the normal logic (that similar things have similar outcomes) applies. Hence:¹¹

Will be born from gulf, and city without end
Born of obscure and tenebrous parents:
Who the power of the great king revered
Will wish to destroy at Rouen and Evreux.

In this instance, the obscure birth of the individual in question will only bring evil and gloom in its wake. This alternative logical configuration appears in yet a further example, in which obscurity signifies once more the doom to come:¹²

When the inscription D.M. found
In ancient vault by lamplight discovered,